EFFECTIVE GOAL SETTING FOR YOUTH SPORTS
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Goal setting is one of the most effective techniques for enhancing motivation and performance. Goals set direction, tell us what to do, increase effort, persistence and quality of performance. Once set, goals require that us to develop specific techniques for how to achieve those goals.

Sport psychologists have come to realize that goal setting can enhance or undermine motivation depending upon both the athlete's personal style and the specific circumstances for which goals are set. Two patterns have emerged. First, the techniques for effective goal setting have been refined and clarified to the point where goal setting is perhaps the simplest and yet most effective motivational technique available today. Second, the effectiveness of these goal setting techniques are now known to be influenced by an athlete's personal styles or goal orientation. Goal setting techniques properly matched to these styles enhance motivation. Mismatching type of goals with personal style can actually de-motivate athletes.

BASIC GOAL SETTING TECHNIQUES

The basic techniques for setting effective goals are[1]:

• **Set Performance Rather Than Outcome Goals**

First, performance is what the athlete controls. Outcomes are frequently controlled by others. For instance, once taught, a young basketball player can know and select the best position for guarding his man. However, effectively stopping the opponent from scoring may depend on the speed, agility and skill of the other player. Since goals can be set which have varying degrees of personal control, coaches and athletes must make practical judgements concerning how much control is necessary for the athlete to feel in command of his success rate. For example, if the batter is at a similar skill level as the pitcher, making solid contact with the ball regardless of whether or not he reaches base safely might be the most appropriate goal for maximally enhancing the batter's motivation.

Second, performance goals focus on causal factors while outcome goals focus on symptoms. Athletes and coaches who focus on outcomes are less likely to be aware of the causal factors which are responsible for the successful outcomes. Effective coaches coach causes, not symptoms of sports performance. Causal factors are what the athlete controls. A baseball outfielder who throws weakly and off direction, may not be planting his feet properly before the throw. Coaching the athlete to "hit the cut off man" illustrates coaching the symptom caused by the error of poorly planting the feet. Coaching the proper foot position (i.e., "step and throw") is much more likely to result in improved performance than telling the athlete that his throw is weak or off-line, something that he probably already realizes.

- **Set Measurable and Specific Goals**

    Goals stated in the form of "I want to be the best that I can be!" or "I want to improve my performance," are vague and difficult to measure. They sound positive are difficult, if not impossible, to assess whether they have been reached. An aspect of measuring goals is that athletes get to establish a baseline from which to measure improvement. Improvement is more difficult if athletes do not have a clear idea of their starting points.

- **Set Demanding but Realistic Goals**

    Effective goals are perceived as challenging not threatening. A challenging goal is difficult but attainable within a reasonable amount of time, effort or ability. A threat is perceived when the goal is seen as beyond one's ability. The word realistic implies that judgement is involved. Goals based upon a current baseline of actual performance recorded during the past two weeks are likely to be realistic.

    When in uncertain about the ability of an athlete to achieve a goal, set the goal lower rather than higher. Why such a counterintuitive recommendation? Because it is more effective to raise a goal upon successful completion of an initial goal than it is to lower a goal that turns out to be unachievable. Lowering goals demotivate athletes and undermine the credibility of the coach. Successful completion of a goal that subsequently leads to setting a higher goal can be quite motivating.

- **Set Both Long- vs. Short-Term Goals**

    Both long- and short-term goals provide direction but short-term goals appear to have the greatest motivational effects. While long-term goals are still very important in terms of providing an overall blueprint for the short-term goals, the more distant a goal seems, the less energizing effect it is likely to have. Athletes perceive short-term goals as more readily attainable and should view them as stepping stones to achieve the more distant long-term goals. The accomplishment of a short-term goal becomes the baseline for the next short-term goal.

    Just as importantly, unrealistic short-term goals, because of their immediacy, are easier to recognize than unrealistic long-term goals. Once recognized, unrealistic goals can be modified before substantial, valuable practice time has been lost. If your long term goal is to bat .300, your short -terms goals might be to reduce the number of called third strikes that you take or to practice placing the ball during batting practice in the gap between where the third baseman and the shortstop typically stand.

- **Set Positive vs. Negative Goals**

    Normally, positive means good while negative is bad. However, setting positive goals goes far beyond those labels. First, positive goals tell what to do rather than what not to do. Negative goals direct our attention to the errors we wish to avoid. Try telling someone not to

think of pink elephants! Second, there are typically far more factors to be avoided than to be done to successfully perform a skill. Knowing what to do allows an athlete to focus on fewer concerns than on all the variety of things which might go wrong. Third, positive goals also require coaches and athletes to decide **how** they will reach those specific goals. Once the goal is decided, the athlete and coach must problem solve to come up with the specific strategies and techniques to attain that goal. Fourth, negative goals often involve holding back. For example, "Don't rush," or "Don't make that mistake." Effective sports performance often requires an intense effort. Goals which tell the athlete "what to do" allow improvement by substituting a correct movement for an incorrect one rather than holding back on an error.

• **Set Priorities**

Setting a limited number of high priority goals requires athletes and coaches to decide what is important and fundamental for continued development. Effective goals have a high priority and are few in number. While a young athlete may have many things to master, setting too many goals tend to diffuse their focus.   Initially, athletes should avoid setting too many different goals. As their skill at goal setting improves, more goals can be set simultaneously, but even advanced athletes should avoid establishing so many goals that their practice sessions are confusing. Establishing a few, carefully selected goals also allows athletes and coaches to keep more accurate records without becoming overwhelmed with record keeping. Athletes are more aware of their progress when they focus on a few, high priority goals. Not only is seeing progress quite motivating, but also goals can be quickly modified if little progress is observed.

• **Set Mutually Determined Goals**

Goal setting becomes an effective motivational tool when athletes become committed to those goals because they have had significant input in establishing them. When goals are imposed or established without significant input from the athletes, motivation can often be undermined rather than enhanced.

To improve commitment, athletes must feel that the goals are **their** goals, not just the coach's. This is not to say that the coach's knowledge, experience and preferences should not be involved in the goal-setting process but rather that the goals should be **owned** by the athletes. Athletes should be involved in goal setting at a level compatible with their sports experience and maturity. Very young or inexperienced athletes might be given a number of goals to chose from while older and more advanced athletes might develop their goals more independently.

Second, coaches should be highly supportive of both the goal setting process and the day-to-day training done to achieve those goals. When the value of goals is not obvious, the coach must explain those benefits in a language the athletes can understand. If an athlete sets goals which are too high, the coach can point out the steps which must be done first and encourage those steps to be the athlete's initial goals. If the goals are too low, the athlete's goals can become the first step to attaining a higher goal.

• **Set Specific Time Lines**

Deadlines provide an urgency to the athletes' efforts. Target dates help to establish realistic steps (short-term goals) to the overall practice objective (long-term goals). Specific target dates tend to eliminate wishful thinking and clarify which goals are realistic and which are not. Time lines are especially valuable in high risk sports such as gymnastics and diving where fear often promotes procrastination in learning of new skills.

• **Set Both Formal vs. Informal Goals**

While the initial establishment of goals can be quite formal, as the athletes and coaches become comfortable with the techniques of goal setting, goals can be established even as the athlete is in the midst of a workout. Particularly with short-term goals, the accomplishment of a prior goal can lead to setting of a new goal within the context of a single practice session. Some coaches and athletes think that goals must be set in formal meetings outside of practice and require long periods of thoughtful evaluation before they are decided upon. Often goals can be chosen in sequence. They are literally progressions which coaches have been using for years but are now expressed in measurable, performance terms rather than as vague, generalized outcomes.

• **Set Both Team and Individual Goals**

Since effective goals are those for which the athlete has maximal control, individual goals are likely to be more effective than team goals. Of course team goals and individual goals are often closely related. For example, a soccer team's goalie can give the defensive player correct field instructions even though the defensive player fails to respond to the verbal instruction. The team defense might falter but the goalie did his or her part. Conversely, the defensive player might respond to the goalie's words but the goalie might have called the wrong strategy. If both are working toward their individual goals, the team goal of a cohesive, interactive defense can be met yet the individual elements are still under the control of the individual athletes.

• **Recognize Goal Setting Domains**

When asked to set goals, athletes typically focus on the learning of new skills or performances in competitions. A major role of the coach is to broaden the athletes' perception of those areas in which goal setting can be an effective tool. Goals can be set to enhance fitness, to improve attendance, to increase intensity, to promote sportsmanship, to develop team spirit, to find more free time, or to establish consistency.

• **Set Both Mastery Goals and Process Goals**

Process goals are mastery goals that are primarily under the athlete's control but their attainment is merely a means to an end. For example, decreasing the number of strokes a

swimmer requires to complete a length of the pool ultimately allows the swimmer to swim faster, the primary mastery goal. Lowering the swimmer's time is the primary objective and reducing the number of strokes helps achieve that goal. Increasing one's leg strength allows a football player more success in driving back an opposing lineman.

EVALUATING GOAL SETTING EFFECTIVENESS

Which of the following goals is effective and which is less effective and why?

Situation #1: A swimmer in collaboration with her coach sets a goal of swimming one length of the pool with 13 arm strokes per length compared to her previous best of 15 arm strokes per length within one week of setting the goal.

Situation #2: Despite a 2-10 Team Won/Loss record by late July, a 12-year-old with a .250 batting average sets the goal of earning a berth on the all-star baseball at the end of the summer.

Answers at the end of this article.

GOAL SETTING STYLES

Goal orientations refer to athlete's tendencies to seek out specific types of goals. These styles reflect how different athletes attempt to answer the question "What is success?" Success occurs when a person infers personally desirable characteristics or attain personally meaningful objectives as a result of his or her efforts[2]. Three distinct goal setting styles have been identified: Performance Oriented (PO), Success Oriented (SO) and Failure Oriented (FO)[3]. These three styles interact with the person's perceived ability (Am I competent?), the type of situation (e.g., practice vs. competition) and performance expectancies (Do I think I can do it?) to guide the setting of specific goals. The characteristics of each personal style are:

- **Performance Oriented (PO)**
  These athletes focus on learning. They assume they have the ability to succeed and success and failure are related to degree of learning. If they fail, it is because they haven't learned yet. But the implication is that they can and will learn. Failure at a task is considered a lack of having learned a skill, not an inability to learn. PO athletes are typically concerned about skill improvement, mastery of the task and competency. They sustain effort on difficult tasks and look upon self-improvement as success. Said differently, their goals are self-referenced.

- **Success Oriented (SO)**
  These athletes judge success and failure by social comparisons (i.e., "How well do I compare to others?"). SO athletes actively seek competition because they expect positive social comparisons to others. Because of their physical prowess, they typically have been better than others and expect similar high rankings to continue in the future.

- **Failure Oriented (FO)**

These athletes also judge success and failure by social comparisons. However, FO athletes have consistently ranked low in the past and now avoid competitive situations because they continue to expect negative social comparisons. They may participate in competitive sports because of factors beyond the enjoyment of competition (e.g., parental encouragement, their desire to affiliate with friends, concrete rewards for participating).

IMPLICATIONS OF THE DIFFERENT GOAL ORIENTATIONS

Both SO and FO athletes see improvement and task mastery are important primarily as a means of achieving positive social comparisons such as winning or ranking high compared to opponents. Thus, their judgements of success are often based upon factors outside their personal ability to control. For example, SO and FO athletes might see promotion from the junior varsity to the varsity as threatening because now their chances of winning or ranking high are diminished because the varsity athletes are better.

SO athletes believe they are capable but tend to reduce risk, especially in highly competitive situations, by choosing tasks which they believe they can learn relatively quickly. FO athletes sacrifice learning by regularly choosing moderately easy or extremely difficult tasks. Failure at an extremely difficult task (i.e., swimming the English Channel) has less risk because few could be expected to succeed. On the other hand, after selecting a very easy goal, FO athletes are likely to work very hard to succeed because they do not wish to be seen as failing at a very easy task. If they have difficulty with moderately easy goals at which they believe others can succeed, they will often quickly discontinue their efforts or turn their attempts into jokes. They often avoid preparation for achieving these moderately difficult goals because they can then say which some self-justification that "they could have" if only they had more time to prepare. "I just wasn't ready" is often used to justify failure and/or lack of effort.

PO athletes tend to work hard at achieving difficult goals even after failure. The persistence of SO athletes deteriorates only after extensive failure because they typically believe they are capable. However, the persistence of FO athletes deteriorates sharply after even minimal failure. Thus, PO athletes are the most likely to approach their learning potential. They tolerate failure well and persist because they do not perceive failure as a threat to their competency. SO athletes perform well enough to win but they are likely to approach their potential only if external factors required the full development of their skills. This translates into the common finding that the most physically talented athletes on your team are often the most difficult to motivate to work hard at improving their skills because they already are the best in the group. FO athletes commonly show poor or erratic skill learning and frequently display avoidance behavior (They don't like setting goals because goals become standards against which they can be judged. Their lack of confidence in their ability makes such potential evaluations stressful as opposed to the PO athletes who often find such evaluations challenging.)

IMPROVING ONE'S SELF VS. PROVING ONE'S SELF

These three different orientation styles predict three different approaches to learning. Learning involves risk-taking – the more demanding the skill, the greater the risk of failure. Failure in a public setting such as sport can, for some, be quite threatening. PO athletes assume they have ability; they see failing at a task as simply not having yet learned the skill. Their competency is not threatened. Both SO and FO athletes interpret failure as a lack of competency. The PO athlete has the objective of *improving* oneself – self-referenced – while the SO and FO athletes have the objective of *proving* oneself to others – social comparison.

MATCHING GOAL SETTING TECHNIQUES TO YOUR ATHLETES' PERSONAL STYLES

Athletes with different goal setting styles prefer different types of goals. Performance oriented athletes prefer performance and process goals while success and failure oriented athletes prefer outcome goals. Table 1 summarizes the preferred goal attributes for athletes with these three different goal setting styles.

Table 1. Preferred Types of Goals As a Function of Goal Setting Style			
Style / Goal Attribute	Performance Oriented	Success Oriented	Failure Oriented
Frame of Reference	Self-Referenced	Social Comparison	Social Comparison
Specificity	Specific	Specific	General
Task Difficulty	Difficult	Moderately Difficult	Very Easy or Very Difficult
Positive vs. Negative Approach	Positive	Positive & Negative	Positive
Group vs. Individual Responsibility	Individual	Individual	Group
Immediacy	Long & Short Term	Long & Short Term	Long Term

The dividing line between performance and outcome is a sliding scale. Most goals have components that are both performance and outcome. Virtually all goals provide varying degrees of personal control depending upon the athlete's ability, skill and experience. Coaches and athletes must make realistic judgements concerning how much control is necessary for the athlete to feel in control and to control his or her success rate. For example, if the batter's skill is similar to that of the pitcher, the goal of making solid contact with the ball becomes a performance goal that is likely to enhance the batter's motivation. If the pitcher is capable of throwing 85 miles per hour strikes, most 12-year-olds will be incapable of making regular contact.

SPECIFIC COACHING RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the patterns just described, the following specific recommendations can be made:

- **For All Athletes**
  • Teach your athletes to "learn to shift" their orientations back and forth between performance orientations (Did we play well?) and outcome orientations (Did we win?). Very high-level athletes typically report that they have both orientations and use them differently depending upon the circumstances.
  • Competitive settings, by their very nature, tend to promote outcome orientations. But it is performance orientations that tend to promote higher performance, more skill development, more risk taking, and greater self-improvement.
  • Emphasize performance orientations in practice. They are easier to nurture in practices than competition. They can be encouraged by directing your coaching toward performance goals. Performance orientations produce consistently high effort and intensity by athletes. Outcome goals will follow.
  • Use a combination of performance and outcome goals in competition.
  • Use short-term goals to motivate and energize behavior. Use long-term goals to provide direction. Short-term goals can be long-term goals broken down into the performance steps required to achieve the long-term goal.

- **For SO Athletes**
  • Highly skilled SO athletes **on well-learned tasks** tend to be motivated by both positive ("Make your foul shot!") and negative ("Don't miss your foul shot!").
  • Success orientations tend to promote effort and intensity sufficient only enough to rank high. Thus, SO athletes often display low motivation when competing against very weak opponents where ranking high typically requires little effort or against very strong opponents against whom the odds of winning are very low.

- **For FO Athletes**
  • Left on their own, FO athletes tend to choose very easy or very difficult goals. Direct them to moderately difficult goals that promote learning but do not generate excessively high levels of anxiety because they typically expect to fail at attaining difficult goals.
  • With FO athletes, who focus primarily on avoiding failure, allow generalized, group, and long-term goals to minimize stress and de-motivating their efforts.

Coaches' Paradox: Competition strongly promotes outcome orientations while performance orientations are more likely in practices than competition. Performance orientations foster higher performance, more skill development, more risk taking and greater self-improvement. Fortunately, there are typically more practices than games and, thus, coaches have more opportunities to teach athletes to "learn to shift" their orientations.

Answers to Evaluating Goals.

Situation #1:
A relatively effective "good" goal. It is a performance/process goal. She is attempting to swim faster by using less strokes. Since she has demonstrated that she is strong enough to swim the length of the pool in 15 strokes, she can then reasonably reduce the number of strokes by 13.3% (2/15) in a reasonable time of one week. Her goal is easily measured and has been mutually agreed upon using experience of the coach and her belief that she can do it. Reasonable difficult.

Situation #2:
Not a very effective goal to set. It is an outcome goal decided by the coaches who select the All-Star Team. That far into the season, his .250 batting average is unlikely to change sufficiently to warrant strong consideration; not enough time for personal improvement on a team where fewer at bats are likely.

To cite this article, please use the following APA citation format:

Feigley, D. A. (2018, September). Effective Goal Setting for Youth Sports. Retrieved from http://www.youthsports.rutgers.edu

End Notes

1. Feigley, D.A. (2018). Chapter 5: Guidelines for Effective Goal Setting. **Coaching the child behind the athlete: A development approach to youth sport. Forest Knolls, CA: Warde Publishing,** 101-118.
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